

About Face

U.S. Asia policy architect has a change of heart

By Susumu Awanohara in Washington

It's just as well Americans don't share the Asian horror of losing face. If they did, Winston Lord would probably have committed the Washington equivalent of *hara-kiri* by now. As assistant secretary of state for East Asia and the Pacific, Lord is widely seen as the chief architect of America's Asian policy and a leading exponent of its controversial linking of human rights and trade. But now he has suddenly reversed position and is criticising the policies he was instrumental in formulating.

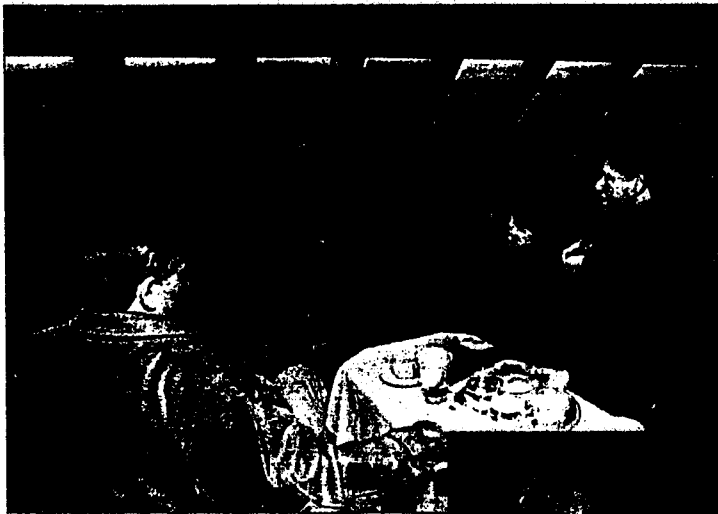
Evidence of the about face came in the form of a leaked internal memo from Lord to his boss, Secretary of State Warren Christopher. The memo, written last month, suggests that President Bill Clinton's key Asia officials are preparing the ground for a significant softening of the insistence on human rights that has so irritated Asian governments. East Asian countries wanted — and have been convinced of — America's continued engagement in their region, but "they now are beginning to resist the nature of that engagement," Lord warned Christopher in the memo. "A series of American measures, threatened or employed, risk corroding our positive image in the region, giving ammunition to those charging we are an international nanny, if not bully."

Washington is rife with speculation about the reasons for Lord's sudden change of heart. The memo "is a stunning self-indictment," says East Asia specialist Robert Manning, who served in the Bush administration's State Department. "The problems he cites are a direct outcome of the missionary approach to Asia Lord has propounded." Many Asia hands inside and outside government suspect that Lord, who is being blamed by United States businessmen and the foreign policy establishment for Clinton's embattled China policy, may be trying to save his job.

Lord himself insists that he is not seeking to shift the blame to others for a failed policy. "The purpose of the memo is to look at problems as well as successes and make course corrections where necessary," he told the REVIEW. Asian diplomats in Washington appear, for the most part, to

welcome the public airing of a memo more or less summarising their grievances. "Let's wait and see what Lord can do about them," as one Asian diplomat puts it.

There is little that is surprising in the memo's list of problem areas for the U.S. in Asia: with Japan over trade; with China over human rights; with China and Thailand over weapons proliferation; with Indonesia and Malaysia over workers' rights; with Singapore over the caning of a teenage American vandal; with Taiwan over endangered species; with Laos over narcotics control; and with most of Asia over



Apec summit, 1993: what's happened to the community spirit? Inset: Lord.

the proper approach towards Burma.

Nor is Lord's estimation of the likely consequences of aggressive unilateralism on Washington's regional standing particularly surprising. His list of the likely consequences includes:

- ▶ weakened U.S. influence in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum;
- ▶ less Asian receptivity to U.S. views in regional security dialogues; and
- ▶ ammunition for Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad, who wants to create an Asian economic entity excluding the U.S.; and for Chinese leaders and others charging that the U.S. wants to dominate East Asia.

As various critics of administration policy had done before him, Lord enumerated in his memo recent instances of Asian countries disagreeing with U.S. policy and

refusing to follow it. These include former Japanese Prime Minister Morihiro Hosokawa's "undercutting of us on human rights during his China visit," South Korean President Kim Young Sam's "softer pitch in Beijing on the [North Korean] nuclear issue" and the Bangkok meeting of Asian officials last year "which sought to counter the universality of human rights." Lord adds: "All of this is played out against the backdrop of dwindling resources in personnel, overseas posts and aid levels for this priority region."

Just days before the *Washington Post* first wrote about Lord's memo on May 5, a senior White House official expressed alarm at the "rapidly eroding good will established in Seattle last November," when Clinton hosted the first Apec summit and declared the advent of a "Pacific Community." The official told the REVIEW: "There's a feeling in Asia that U.S. policy is becoming,

once again, a list of complaints. There's deep-seated suspicion that the U.S. does not mean what it says."

Such confusion and resentment over U.S. policy is widespread in Asia. Former U.S. Sen. Adlai Stevenson, now an investment banker and active member of the semi-official Pacific Economic Cooperation Council, writes in a forthcoming report: "At no time since the end of World War II has such a broad spectrum of opinion in the Pacific viewed the U.S. as increasingly isolated and its policies the central 'problem' of the region." Stevenson thinks "this perception of the U.S. is as much a function of growing regional consciousness and confidence as it is resentment towards policies which are seen as threatening protectionism and the propagation of Western values."

William Watts, president of the policy group Potomac Associates, recently returned from a month's travel in East Asia and says he is disturbed by the spread and intensity of Asian doubt about U.S. policy. "Everywhere they asked me: 'Why do you go out of your way to annoy and alienate those countries that you say are of vital interest to you?'" Watts says.

Australia's Ambassador to the U.S. Don Russell, meanwhile, has taken to publicly criticising U.S. policy towards Asia, albeit ever so gently, stressing that the criticism comes from a "trusted friend and partner." "Australia is one Asia-Pacific nation which holds almost identical values as the U.S. on the issue of human rights, but which has